## A FOOTNOTE ON THE REBEL YELL

Allen Walker Read's ingenious discussion of the rebel yell[1] is not completely satisfying, probably because the author is not adequately grounded in Southern mores. As one with such grounding, I mentioned my misgivings to Raven McDavid, a visiting professor but Southern born, who confided that he too had had misgivings about Read's hypothesis—a derivation from the Indian war whoop—but had been able to cite only the word of a Confederate veteran: "We yelled just like we was chasin' rabbits."

Chasing rabbits! Of course! If McDavid had only been an experienced rabbit-chaser,[2] he could have produced an airtight case. In the South, rabbits have traditionally been chased by sportsmen running alongside their dogs.[3] The yell of the running rabbit-chaser is a reinforcement of the cry of the dogs and as close an imitation as the human vocal organs can produce.

But what kind of dog? It must be one with a piercing melodious voice, one that is traditionally associated with rabbit-hunting and naturally likes the chase, one that has been popular in the South. The beagle qualifies on all counts. The affection of Lyndon Johnson for his beagles is but one recent notable testimonial to the esteem in which Southrons have held the breed. It is the only dog specifically mentioned in the pastoral prologue to William

1. "The Rebel Yell as a Linguistic Problem," *American Speech* 46 (1961): 83–92.

2. Since Read categorically rejects any connection between the yell and known hunting calls, I use the terms *chasing* and *running*, both to avoid misunderstanding and to provide the proper connotation of an activity designed to put food on the tables of the poor, rather than—like fox hunting—to provide entertainment for the affluent.

3. As late as the 1920s, the game laws in some Southern states provided a longer season—sometimes the entire year—when rabbits could be hunted "without guns," that is, with dogs by rabbit-chasers working afoot. In South Carolina (as attested by Milledge B. Seigler, the chief huntsman of the University's English Department), there is still a long season for this kind of rabbit trailing, though it is now used less for getting food than by sportsmen for training their dogs to follow a scent.

Gilmore Simms's *Paddy McGann* (1863).[4] Urban beagle-owners being walked by their charges are often reminded by passing strangers that their dogs are natural rabbit-runners; and the panache with which an urban beagle chases a trespassing cat or squirrel is a delight to behold. The voice is melodious and penetrating and carries a long way.

The Confederates were primarily rural, steeped in the traditions of having game—small as well as large—as a part of their food. If one wishes a psychological explanation, Southern boys would grow up running alongside their dogs, yelling with them to keep the quarry moving. Gone to war, they would—in a magnified version of the hunt—identify with loyal hounds, out to make the varmints, the Yankee invaders, run to cover. And in the zest of the chase, they would cry out spontaneously as their dogs were wont to do. Then it would become a tradition.

The effect? Imagine a dozen beagles arrhythmically ululating in pursuit of a rabbit. Then multiply this spontaneous ululation a hundredfold, rolling out of the mists and underbrush along the edge of the battlefield. No wonder the rebel yell could terrify Yankee troops, often city bred and used to cheering only in a regimented "Hip! hip! hurrah!" For, as friendly and sociable as beagles are, a single one in good voice can panic a dozen teen-agers who have blundered into his yard on a mission of mischief. I have seen it happen.

M. B. DARWIN
*Columbia, South Carolina*

4. An earlier novel by Simms was entitled *Border Beagles* (1840).